



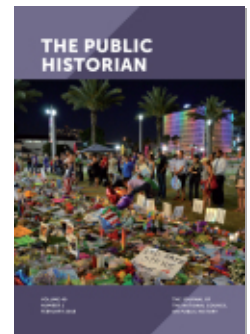
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Interpreting Agriculture at Museums and Historic Sites by
Debra A. Reid (review)

Lu Ann Jones

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(Review)

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president before or since,” the authors argue, “embodied paradigms of both opposing camps as consummately as Lincoln” (139).

Lincoln reminiscences, however, were also conceived in the context of a civil conflict itself fought, as Lincoln himself summed it up, over competing conceptions of liberty. This study, however, is less concerned with Lincoln’s moral message, and how that was memorialized, than it is with the act of memorialization itself. It is, in short, an exploration of the style over the substance as far as memories of Lincoln are concerned. So at first glance the questions it asks of these, concerning class and character, style and social mobility, may be of more interest to political scientists and linguists than historians as such. The answers it arrives at, however, have a wider resonance. This study offers an alternative and insightful angle on American political development in the Civil War era, broadly conceived. It traces an original path through the persistent tensions between republican elitism and democratic equality in American political and, indeed, social life. In particular, it is astute about the ways in which Lincoln’s memory was disseminated through the press to a wider public audience, and how this dissemination enabled the debate over Lincoln’s character and leadership style, his political agenda and his private, personal perspective, to speak to a wider national debate about language and presidential character. For that reason alone, *Memories of Lincoln* is likely to be of interest to a broad readership in 2017 and beyond as questions of class, character, and presidential leadership gain media traction once more.

Susan-Mary Grant, Newcastle University

Interpreting Agriculture at Museums and Historic Sites by Debra A. Reid. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. vii + 265 pp.; illustrations, notes, appendix, index; clothbound, \$85.00; paperbound, \$38.00; eBook, \$36.00.

Anyone who doubts the timeliness of *Interpreting Agriculture at Museums and Historic Sites* need only recall a news story from the summer of 2017 when pollsters asked respondents to identify the origins of chocolate milk. Some 7 percent reportedly replied that it came from brown cows.¹ Or if that seems far-fetched, I have eavesdropped on buyers at our northern Virginia farmers market, clueless about growing seasons, asking vendors for apples in May and strawberries in September. We are a nation of agricultural illiterates.

Debra A. Reid, a respected historian and curator of agriculture, has produced a call to action and a blueprint for museums and historic sites that want to incorporate the rich themes of agriculture into exhibits and public programs. “The stakes are high,” Reid writes, “the general public needs to learn more about the sources of their food, fiber, and fuel, and they need to interact with the farmers who produce them” (34).

1 Caitlin Dewey, “Do Brown Cows Make Chocolate Milk?,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2017.

With the goal of helping “local history museums use their stories and their collections to make a difference,” Reid outlines steps that curators and site managers can follow to make agriculture and the many themes it engages (from science and technology to art, literature, politics, and international trade) relevant to today’s visitors (xiii). For example, Reid suggests asking visitors what agriculture-related topics interest them. Perhaps it is the origins of their food, or changing land-use patterns as fields and pastures succumb to housing developments. Next, Reid sketches the basics of historical research, from surveying pertinent secondary sources, to identifying and reading critically primary sources and assessing how an institution’s existing collection can support exhibits and programs about agriculture. Reid plays to her strengths in the history of midwestern agriculture, but the basic research template that she creates can apply to any time and place.

Reid supplements her own work with the scholarship of others, some of it previously published. For example, one chapter, J. L. Anderson’s “Changes in Corn-Belt Crop Culture: Iowa, 1945–1972,” examines the industrialization of agriculture after World War II when new harvest machinery, hybrid seeds, and “the chemical cocktail of fertilizer, herbicide, and insecticide” increased the capital needed to farm and altered the structures and landscapes of farmsteads (134). Anderson models the kind of meticulous research needed to interpret recent transformations in agriculture and rural life.

In “A Curator’s Legacy,” William S. Pretzer describes how Peter Cousins, the late curator of agriculture at The Henry Ford museum, “applied a humanities-centric agenda in collecting technological innovation” (137). The object of Cousins’s desire was a self-propelled mechanical cotton picker. After the curator located a 1950 model, he had to conduct a long courtship before the owner, a farmer in Southern California, was willing to part with what had become a beloved machine. The owner finally agreed to donate the picker only after he documented the machine’s place in the history of his family, farm, and community—and after Cousins honored and amplified the owner’s efforts through his own oral history interviews and archival research. Mutual respect and collaboration allowed the two men to “assembl[e] a narrative that moved far beyond the confines of the artifact” and placed it in the context of how mechanization affected people’s lives and work (145).

Useful articles also relate the development of roads and bridges to farm and rural economies; explain the intricacies of horses, carriages, and harnesses; and consider the practical and ethical concerns when incorporating livestock into agricultural interpretation. Other chapters offer guidance on how to assess agricultural artifacts and how to interpret visual evidence. Case studies of exhibit development supplement these chapters and offer realistic models of planning, research, and interpretation.

“Today,” Reid writes, “interpreting what was once common starts with an introduction to a foreign topic” (215). Reid offers important advice for engaging audiences on what has become the unfamiliar territory of agriculture, beginning “with the present and documenting the ‘now’ before moving to the history” (221).

For example, one could ask: Who owns the farms in your community? Who works on them? What are the markets for local farm commodities? What federal policies affect how farmers obtain credit and determine what to plant? What local businesses support—and depend on—agriculture? What happens to local economies when farms get bigger while the number of farmers declines, or farmers sell out altogether?

The book ends with a helpful appendix that directs readers to useful bibliographies, information about national agricultural policies, and pertinent professional organizations. Newcomers to interpreting agriculture can turn to ready guides, including a number of agricultural museums and sites. Agricultural and rural history has flourished in the past twenty-five years and the scholarship—and historians—are ready resources.

Why make the effort to interpret agriculture? Because, according to Reid, “the future of humanity on the planet depends on it” (xiii). Hers is a call to action that is hard to ignore.²

Lu Ann Jones, National Park Service

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The views and conclusions in this review are those of the author and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the National Park Service or the United States Government.

Museums: A History by John E. Simmons. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. v + 304 pp.; illustrations, tables, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$85.00; eBook, \$80.50.

In recent years, despite the growth of historical literature on museums, no single textbook has provided a concise introduction to museum history. *Museums: A History* helps fill this void.

The author, John E. Simmons, teaches museum studies at Kent State University and is an adjunct curator of collections for the Earth and Mineral Sciences Museum and Art Gallery at Pennsylvania State University. Simmons served as director of the University of Kansas’s Museum Studies Program between 2001 and 2007. Personal anecdotes drawn from the author’s museum experiences are sprinkled throughout the text.

Simmons opens by noting, “In this book I present a critical examination of the history of museums from the point of view of museum collections—how and why objects have been collected, the transition of objects from their original contexts to